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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSG #1204 1521928  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 011928Z JUN 06  
FM AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9324  
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 3178  
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 3054  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0965  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JUN 4632  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 4577

UNCLAS SANTIAGO 001204

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV SOCI CI

SUBJECT: STUDENT PROTESTS GATHER WIDE SUPPORT

¶1. Summary. On May 30, almost eighty percent of Chile's one million high school students participated in a nation-wide strike. In several major cities including Santiago, protests turned mildly violent. What began as a minor movement in April has now gained widespread public support for major educational reform. The Government of Chile has begun a dialogue with the protesting students, but street protests may continue. End Summary.

¶2. Nearly 800,000 Chilean secondary school students took to the streets of major cities on May 30. Nearly one thousand secondary schools had to suspend operations, as students sought to press their demands against the GOC in public. The students' major demands are 1) unlimited transportation; 2) elimination of fees for the required nation-wide university entrance exam; and most importantly, 3) improvement in the quality of Chile's public education system.

¶3. The protests began as minor affairs in April in Santiago. GOC officials dismissed the protests as they involved only a small number of students and produced nothing more than vandalism in downtown Santiago. In the last several weeks, however, students have developed a cogent set of demands and tapped into an apparently widespread vein of deep dissatisfaction with Chile's public secondary schools. Private school students have recently joining in the protests, as have some university students, but more in sympathy and excitement rather than to press their own demands. In several major cities, protests on May 30 turned violent, with 400 arrested and a dozen injured in Santiago alone.

¶4. The students' demands now have the support of the National Teachers Association, a number of members of Congress, and increasingly of the general public itself. Most observers agree with the students about the need for a basic reform of the Chilean public education system. A sweeping law that set up Chile's current public education system was passed in the final days of the Pinochet-led government in March 1990. Most feel the public education system is inadequate compared to the country's private schools. Further exacerbating the gap, regional authorities must fund the public schools, reinforcing the reality and perception of substantial inequalities in the quality of education.

¶5. The GOC began a dialogue only recently with students, as protests spread throughout Chile, and key short-term demands such as free transportation remain unresolved. Obviously, a fundamental reform of the education system will not happen overnight. However, the students have voiced a frustration with Chile's current system that many apparently felt but had not found the venue to express. Given the organization, violence and growing support for the students' demands, the

GOC likely has little choice but to deepen its dialogue with the students.

¶6. Comment. Chile is experiencing its first major, sustained student demonstrations in nearly thirty years, and the scale of the protests and the popular vein they have touched appear to have taken the government by surprise. The government is having difficulty developing an effective response as it tries to balance social order involving its own children, with the widespread acknowledgement that the kids are right -- there is a need for fundamental reform. In the meantime, the students appear increasingly well organized and determined. It is unlikely they will desist without significant demands being met.

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